

ARTICLE APPEARED

ON PAGE 227

NEW YORK TIMES

27 February 1986

Military Sees Problem in Grounding of the Shuttles

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Feb. 26 — The Under Secretary of the Air Force said today that there would be "severe" problems in launching vital military satellites if the three remaining space shuttles remained grounded for more than a year.

The United States depends heavily on an array of reconnaissance, early warning, communication, navigational and weather satellites, and replacements are occasionally needed.

The Air Force official, Edward C. Aldrich, testified before a House Science and Technology subcommittee that the military effect of the Jan. 28 explosion that destroyed the space shuttle Challenger and killed all seven crew members would be "relatively minor" if the three remaining shuttles could resume flights within six months, but he added that this would be "an optimistic viewpoint at this point."

"If the down time was two years," he added, "the Department of Defense

would have serious problems with 21 high-priority payloads waiting on the launch pad for a launch opportunity."

He did not describe these "extremely important" missions, but they are known to include replacements for photographic and infrared reconnaissance satellites that monitor a wide range of military activities in the Soviet Union.

Mr. Aldrich and William R. Graham, Acting Administrator of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, said they saw no plausible way to speed up delivery of 10 new expendable, single-use satellite-launching rockets scheduled to be delivered by late 1988. Those rockets could take the place of the shuttle for sending some of the payloads into space.

Problems in Single-Use Rockets

Further serious delays could arise if an accident grounded one of the remaining shuttles, the men said, and Mr. Aldrich said the Pentagon "would strongly urge" Congress to authorize the construction of a new shuttle.

Mr. Graham told the subcommittee

that he had initiated "design modification efforts" on the joints of the shuttle's solid-fuel booster rockets. Seals in those joints are a prime suspect in the Challenger disaster.

Mr. Graham disclosed that production had been halted on new booster motors and casings but that NASA had stockpiled seven pairs of the rockets.

The Air Force has stockpiled seven Titan rockets that are capable of lifting some of the heavy loads to be sent into space. Ten rockets of a still more capable modification have been authorized by Congress but cannot be delivered until late 1988.

Even so, both officials explained that some large and heavy payloads were designed with the shuttle in mind and would be difficult or impossible to launch with expendable rockets.

Mr. Graham said that NASA now planned nine shuttle missions in the first 12 months after the current grounding ends, 14 in the second year and then a schedule of 16 to 18 launchings annually.